

# Divine Messengers and Mysterious Men in the Patriarchal Narratives of the Book of Genesis\*

MATTHIAS KÖCKERT, BERLIN

## 1. Phenomena

The word “angel” denotes a heavenly being quite independent from its function. The English term is derived from the Latin word *angelus* which is slightly more specific, since it denotes a messenger of the heavenly sphere in contrast to *nuntius* a word only used for messengers between humans. Neither Greek nor Hebrew makes this terminological distinction.

The Hebrew word for “messenger” (*malʾāḱ*) most likely derives from the root *lʾk* which is not found in the Bible but attested in Ugaritic.<sup>1</sup> The verb means “to send”. The noun *malʾāḱ*, however, is attested in Aramaic<sup>2</sup> and in one Phoenician inscription.<sup>3</sup> Just as the Greek ἄγγελος the Hebrew *malʾāḱ* is used for heavenly and earthly messengers.<sup>4</sup> Further it is not always clear whether the messengers in the Bible come from God or whether they are simply human beings. Indeed, “God’s angels do not need any wings”.<sup>5</sup> Biblical messengers are generally pic-

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1 On the etymology of the word see Greenstein, *Equivalency* 329ff. For extra-biblical attestations see Cunchillos, *Étude*, esp. 32-39, and ThWAT IV 888-890.

2 See the Aramaic inscriptions of Sefire (KAI No. 224,8), Dan 3:28; 6:23 as well as one Jewish-Aramaic inscription (cf. DNWSI II, 629).

3 The “messenger of Milk-Astart” in KAI No. 19, 2-3 (222 BCE) is most likely a priest.

4 Cf. Gen 19:1 and texts like 1Kgs 19:5 etc. with passages like Gen 32:4.7; 1Kgs 19:2 etc.

5 Thus the title of a popular book by Claus Westermann published in 1957. Winged divine messengers are first attested in Dan 9:21 (Gabriel) and Rev 14:6. Christian iconography only pictures angels with wings from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards; for Jewish iconography see the representation of Ezek 37 on the murals of the synagogue of Dura Europos.

tured as a man.<sup>6</sup> When a man is finally recognized as an angel, i.e. as a messenger sent by God, he has most likely already vanished. If that is the case the people to whom his message was delivered generally identify him with YHWH himself (Gen 16:13; 22:14) – quite a confusing game.

The Bible knows of other heavenly beings in contact with humanity who are not called *malʾāk*. In Gen 18:2-9 we simply read of three men (*ʾnšym*) whom Abraham encounters and to whom he offers hospitality. In the course of the narrative these men are quickly identified as not being from this world. In a similar instance in Gen 32:25 it first seems to be simply a man (*ʾyš*) who wrestles with Jacob.<sup>7</sup> Towards the end of the narrative it becomes apparent that he had wrestled God as the narrator lets the “man” state in v.29.

Normally the messenger who delivers a divine message appears as one individual; however in several passages in the Jacob story we encounter a plurality of heavenly beings who are labelled “messengers of God” (now in the plural).<sup>8</sup> In Gen 28:12 we meet them travelling back and forth between the earthly resting place of Jacob and the heavenly place of YHWH. In Gen 32:3 Jacob identifies the “messengers of God” as camp of the army (?) of God (*mḥnh ʾlhym*). In both instances the heavenly beings are called “messengers” but they do not deliver any message. Rather, they seem to resemble those entities who also appear outside the patriarchal narratives of the Book of Genesis and are generally called “army of YHWH”<sup>9</sup> or are identified with “all the host of heaven standing in attendance to the right and to the left” of God forming the court of the heavenly king in his throne room.<sup>10</sup>

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6 In Josh 5:13, Joshua mistakes the ‘general of the army of YHWH’ for a soldier. Also it is possible to compare the king with a ‘messenger of God’ (thus David in 1Sam 19:9; 2Sam 14:15; 19:28). The wife of Menoah, in contrast, describes the angel of YHWH (Judg 13:3) as a ‘man of God’ and his appearance “looked like an angel of God, very frightening” (v.6). The sacrifice offered to the man of God towards the end of the story, however, is an offering for YHWH.

7 Ezek 9:2 speaks of “six men” carrying tools for destruction in their hands and Ezek 10:2 specifies one of them in more detail. Both, the visionary and the reader of the Book of Ezekiel realize immediately that we deal with heavenly beings here who are sent to execute God’s judgement over Jerusalem. In a similar vein, Ezek 40-47 introduces a ‘man’ who guides the visionary through the new Temple and explains its buildings to him (Ezek 40:3ff.). The clueless Daniel receives the explanation of the vision of ram and billy-goat from somebody who looked like a man (*gbr*) and who is later identified with the angel Gabriel (Dan 8:15ff.; cf. 9:21; other persons in Dan 10:5; 12:5ff.).

8 Outside Genesis such a plurality of divine messengers only appears in Ps 91:11-13; 103:20; 148:2; Job 4:18.

9 Cf. Josh 5:14 with Ps 148:2.

10 See 1Kgs 22:19; the spirit (*rwḥ*) belongs to the same sphere; cf. Job 1-2.

Outside the patriarchal traditions the Bible knows of other beings next to God. Gen 6:1-4 mentions the “sons of God” (*bny h’llym*) who unite with the daughters of men. The narrative frame of the Book of Job offers us a rare glimpse into heaven. Here the “sons of God”, amongst them Satan, assemble for an audience with the lord of heaven who in turn takes council with his royal court (Job 1:6; 2:1). Some texts place the sons of God next to the stars. In Job 38:7 the sons of God rejoice together with the morning stars in light of the powerful work of God the creator. In other texts they are called “sons of the Most High” (*bny ‘lywn*) and are certainly gods who nevertheless will be judged by the “Most High” (Ps 82).

How can we explain the multi-faceted nature of the phenomena? The phenomenon that we generally call “angel” is rooted in two different perceptions that are connected to two entirely different functions of such beings.<sup>11</sup>

(1) The idea of the “messenger” is shaped mainly by his sending to human beings with a concrete message. Such messengers appear only on earth in the Bible. Within the idea of a messenger the heavenly and earthly sphere overlap significantly so that the messenger first appears as a normal “man”. Only the contents of his message reveal that he comes from further away. The term “messenger” simply stresses his function, independent from the person who sends him. Therefore his *Gestalt* oscillates between a heavenly and an earthly being. It is only the syntactical connection “messenger of God” or “messenger of YHWH” that stresses – at least for the reader – that we are dealing with a heavenly entity here. This identification, however, creates a new problem. Since the message of the messenger is first and foremost the message of his master, he simply speaks instead of the person who commissioned him. The “I” of the messenger can no longer be distinguished from the “I” of God.<sup>12</sup> The distinction that is made clear for the reader by the narrator’s use of the label “messenger of God” is blurred in the formulation of the message for the person receiving it in the narrative itself. Unlike the reader, this person is unable to recognize at first whether he deals with a human person or with an angel. It is only the remarkable character of the message that hints at the messenger’s heavenly origin.

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11 On this see Röttger, *Mal’ak Jahwe* 12-32. On the double background of the biblical view of angels see recently Mach, *Entwicklungsstadien* 10-64.

12 That the messenger-formula is often missing when a messenger speaks can be neglected, since it is often absent in the few narratives of messengers between humans: it is used in Gen 32:5; Num 20:14; Judg 11:15; 1Kgs 20:3.5 and absent in Num 22:5; Dtn 2:26; 1Sam 6:21; 1Kgs 20:9.10 etc.

(2) Next to the above described phenomenon the Bible knows of heavenly beings surrounding God who is pictured as a king with his court.<sup>13</sup> These beings are serving mainly before God and act almost exclusively in the heavenly sphere. Since humans only encounter these heavenly beings in the context of visions or dreams, i.e. under extraordinary circumstances outside the normal construction of this world the problems connected with the “messenger” are futile. The dreamer or visionary never questions the heavenly provenance of these beings. Satan in the Book of Job or the lying spirit in 1Kgs 22 may be able to influence the events on earth significantly but they never deliver a message. If these heavenly beings speak to the dreamer or visionary they simply explain the dream or the vision – in this respect they differ from the “messengers of God” and their “message”. Since these heavenly beings are not sent to the humans to deliver a divine message they are not (yet) called “messengers”.

(3) We have several texts that seem to belong to the above mentioned second group but nevertheless use the term “messenger”. Apparently the idea of a heavenly council and the idea of a messenger were fused. This is the case in Gen 28:12 and Gen 32:2 but also in the visions of the prophet Zechariah, where the interpreting angel is always called “the messenger who talked with me” (*hmalʔk hdbʔr by*).<sup>14</sup> We have to differentiate this interpreting angel from the “messenger of YHWH” in Zech 3:1-7 who – as is expected of an angel – speaks to Joshua, albeit in a visionary scene. This explains why the heavenly being is called “messenger of YHWH” here and why he has to be distinguished from the interpretative angel who teaches Zechariah elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

The quick survey of the phenomena shows that it is quite difficult to distinguish between the function of a messenger sent from a human to a human person and one sent from God to humans as well as between those messengers that God uses to communicate with other heavenly beings. Therefore the term “messenger” can be used for all these aspects. The differentiation is made by using a more detailed terminology such as “messenger of X”, “messenger of God / YHWH”, and “messenger who talked with me”.

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13 On this see Mullen, Council.

14 Zech 1:9.13.14; 2:2.7; 4:1.5; 5:5.10; 6:4.

15 Within the visionary cycle we finally encounter in Zech 1:11-12 a heavenly being, described as ‘YHWH’s messenger’ who communicates with YHWH and with the heavenly horsemen sent by him but *not* with Zechariah as the visionary. The prophet only receives his information from the already mentioned interpretative angel. ‘YHWH’s messenger’ in contrast is a mediatory figure from amongst the heavenly hierarchy. His designation can be explained by his function.

## 2. Findings

In the traditions of the patriarchal narratives God contacts humans in a variety of ways. Here the distribution of the references is remarkable.

(1) In most cases God does not communicate with humans via a “messenger” or mysterious “men” but talks to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob directly. In texts like Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 22:1-2; 32:3; 35:1 such a communication lacks any specific scenic setting.

(2) In some texts divine speeches are loosely framed by a scenic setting using the verb *rʾh* (ni. “to appear”) that stylizes the event as a theophany (Gen 12:7; 17:1-22; 18:1a; 26:2-5.24; 35:9-13).

(3) In other cases God speaks in a vision (Gen 15:1.13; 46:2), in a dream (to Abimelech of Gerar in Gen 20:3; to Jacob [Gen 28:13-15]; to Laban [Gen 31:24]) or via an oracle (to Rebecca [Gen 25:23]).

Not a single reference from these three groups belongs to the substance of an old narrative. This has long been recognized for the grand divine speeches of the Priestly Writing such as Gen 17 and Gen 35:9-13<sup>16</sup> and recently became increasingly obvious for other texts as well. Gen 15 presupposes the Pentateuch.<sup>17</sup> Gen 20 knows at least the first narrative of the endangering of the female ancestor (*Preisgabe der Ahnfrau*) in Gen 12 and propagates a life in a Diaspora setting.<sup>18</sup> Gen 22:1-2 is on a literary level dependent on Gen 12:1. The narrative of the binding of Isaac wrestles with similar problems as the Book of Job;<sup>19</sup> and the disputation between Abraham and YHWH about divine justice in the light of the annihilation of Sodom (Gen 18:22b-33a) already knows of the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup> The other divine speeches also are relatively young literary formations. The programmatic speech in Gen 12:1-3 is – on a compositional level – closely connected to the speech in Gen 13:14-17: Abraham is here ordered to see the land that God had promised to show him in Gen 12:1.<sup>21</sup> Both speeches are not made at a place of any cultic significance. Therefore it is difficult to grace them with a divine appearance. In Gen 12:1-3 Abraham is still outside the land of Canaan and it is almost logical that the promise of the land that is oriented on “this land” is missing here. The promise is later added at She-

16 Nöldeke, *Untersuchungen* 143-44.

17 See Köckert, *Vätergott* 204-247. Since the original continuation of Gen 13:1 in Gen 18:1 was interrupted by the later insertion of Gen 15 (and Gen 14), Gen 18:1a became necessary (for analysis see Blum, *Komposition*).

18 Van Seters, *Abraham* 171-175; Blum, *Komposition* 405-410; Köckert, *Abraham* 152-161.

19 Von Rad, *Buch* 192; Westermann, *Genesis* 436; Veijola, *Opfer* 149-162.

20 Schmidt, *Deo* 143.156-164.

21 Köckert, *Vätergott*, 250-255.

chem (Gen 12:7). The speech of Gen 13:14-17 offers a detailed location but this location does not correspond to any known place. The peculiar description ("between Bethel in the West and the Ai in the East") indicates an artificial centre of the land exactly on the border between the Northern and Southern Kingdom and makes it apparent that we have a theological geography here.<sup>22</sup> Both speeches together with texts like Gen 28:13-14; Gen 26:2-5.24 and Gen 46:2-4 form the pylons of a literary bridge that links the narratives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with each other.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to that Gen 31:3 and Gen 28:15 reference each other and connect the traditions of Jacob.

It is quite striking that YHWH converses directly with the Patriarchs in precisely those parts of the patriarchal narrative that belong to its youngest parts. In the light of the large number of these divine speeches texts that feature divine messengers are relatively sparse:

(4) A "messenger of YHWH" meets Hagar in the wilderness (Gen 16:7-11) and an angel of God calls Abraham from heaven (Gen 22:11-12.15-16). In a similar vein a messenger of YHWH calls Hagar (Gen 21:17) and speaks to Jacob in his dream (Gen 31:11). Finally Jacob blesses the sons of Joseph by calling upon "the messenger who has redeemed me from all harm" (Gen 48:16).

(5) A group of God's messengers appears to Jacob in a dream during his flight from Esau in Gen 28:12 and he meets them again upon his return (Gen 32:23).

(6) We have to add those mysterious men who are hosted first by Abraham and then by Lot (Gen 18-19). Equally it is a "man" who wrestles Jacob at Jabbok and who blesses him at dawn (Gen 32:23-33). The brief reminiscence of the Jacob narrative in Hos 12:4-5 makes it clear that Jacob did not simply wrestle with a "messenger" (of God) who replaced YHWH but never brought a message.

### 3. Heavenly Beings in the Jacob Tradition

(1) In the oldest kernel of the Jacob tradition the patriarch meets twice a group of "messengers of God". Both encounters form significant turning points in the larger narrative context. The first meeting happened when Jacob leaves the land to seek asylum and protection from Esau at

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22 Cf. the descriptions of the border in the Book of Joshua. According to Josh 16:1-3 and Josh 18:12-13 the border between Ephraim and Benjamin (that belongs to the Southern kingdom) runs along the line of Jericho – Bethel – Luz – Ataroth. Following this course, the place is to be located between Bethel and Ai.

23 Köckert, *Vätergott* 320-321.

his uncle's place (Gen 28:12); the second meeting occurs during his return when he re-enters the land after the border treaty with Laban (Gen 32:2-3).

Gen 28 is the result of a long and complex literary history. Here, Gen 28:(10.)11-13a\*.16-19a form an older narrative describing the discovery of the cultic place of Bethel.<sup>24</sup> This discovery is connected via the vow in Gen 28:20-21a.22 to the Jacob cycle in such a way that it now pictures Israel's forefather fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau. During his first night in foreign lands he "comes upon a certain place (*pg<sup>c</sup> bmqwm*)" where the heavens open up to him. In his dream he sees a stairway that connects heaven and earth.<sup>25</sup> On this stairway the "messengers of God" (*ml<sup>p</sup>ky <sup>l</sup>hym*) are going up and down. Above it, however, God is standing in heaven. When he awakes, Jacob realizes: "Surely YHWH is present in this place and I did not know it." Shaken he continues: "This is none other than the abode of God (*ʔyn zh ky <sup>l</sup>m-byt <sup>l</sup>hym*) and this is the gateway to heaven (*wzh šʕr hšmym*)". Therefore he calls this place (*wyqr<sup>ʔ</sup> ʔ šm hmqwm hhw<sup>ʔ</sup>*) Beth-El, "House of God".

The main contours of the older etiology for the sanctuary are still recognizable. The God whom Jacob encounters is pictured in heaven; heaven, however, is opened up at Bethel. This opening is described by the stairway whose "top reached to the sky" (*wr<sup>š</sup>w mgy<sup>c</sup> hšmymh*). The heavenly beings are not "messengers of God" for nothing, even though they do not relay a message: their presence indicates the continuous encounter between YHWH in the heavens and the earth at this special place. Through them the god YHWH is present at Bethel. "God's messengers" are heavenly beings, i.e. members of another world and therefore – just as the God whom they serve – normally invisible. Jacob, however, Israel's forefather is allowed a glance at this other world and he can, for a little while, view this invisible heavenly reality. Therefore, the patriarch reacts properly when he erects a pillar of stone and pours oil on top of it, thus founding a sanctuary. The sanctuary is the place where heaven and earth meet.

24 The divine speech with its far-reaching promises (Gen 28:13ab-14[15]) already knows the patriarchal triad and its content moves beyond the narrow confines of the Jacob tradition. The speech is – like Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17 – the literary product of a late stage of the composition of the patriarchal narrative. For analysis see Blum, *Composition* 7-35.

25 The Hebrew word *sullām* is connected to Akkadian *simmiltu* (AHw 1045a; Mankowski, *Loanwords* 114-18) and describes a ramp with stairs that also occurs on the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal (see below under 5. English text in Foster, *Muses* 506-524; Akkadian text in STT 28 *inā Namtar arkat simmelat šamā[mī]* (V:42); [*ūrid Ne*]rgal arkat *simmelat šamāmi* (VI:18).

Within the context of Jacob's flight the scene reaches a significance that moves beyond the older etiology for a sanctuary. Now, the narrative places Jacob's travels in foreign lands under the special protection of the God whose presence he experienced at Bethel. The messengers of God can probably be best compared to the angel of God who travels before Abraham's servant and paves his way during his difficult task of acquiring a bride (Gen 24:7.40).<sup>26</sup> On the youngest stratum of the dream narrative "God's messengers" function as the visualizing aspect of the invisible but powerful divine escort. "And behold, I will be with you; I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land ..." (Gen 28:15). This statement not only encompasses the Jacob tradition as a whole but also – via Gen 28:15b – the complete patriarchal narrative at a very young stage. With Vvrse 15 the messengers of God in Genesis 28 are transformed into guardian angels.

Similarly to his flight, also during his return do angels play an important role. Gen 32:2b-3 is in its formulations closely connected to Gen 28.<sup>27</sup> Immediately after his treaty with Laban in Gilead, Jacob is again in his home territory.<sup>28</sup> Here, he encounters "messengers of God" (*ml'ky ʔlhm*) who meet him this time (*pg<sup>c</sup> b*). After Jacob has recognized the angel he interprets the place as "God's camp" and calls it (*wyqr<sup>3</sup> šm hmqwm hhw<sup>3</sup>*) Mahanaim, i.e. "double camp". The little scene serves as a linguistic and thematic prelude to the following events of the closure of the Jacob narrative:<sup>29</sup> God's messengers reappear in the messengers of Jacob (Gen 32:4.7), the camp of God (Mahanaim) is taken up in the two (!) camps of Jacob (*mhnwt*, Gen 32:8.9.11.22); they, in turn, are linked to the gifts for Esau (*mnhh*, Gen 32:14.19.21.22; 33:10). The scene in Gen 32:2b-3 is neither to be regarded as an etiology for a sanctuary,<sup>30</sup> nor as an originally independent piece but rather as a short note that was created for the larger narrative context in the light of the Bethel narrative (Gen 28:11ff.) and now serves as its parallel in the final verses of the Jacob tradition.<sup>31</sup>

26 See also the 'guardian angel' in Ps 91:11. m. Ber. Rab. LXVIII (Wünsche, 333) Rashi, Bamberger, 77 and Jacob, Buch 580, assume for Gen 28 two kinds of angels: 'angels of home' who ascend into heaven, because Jacob leaves his country and 'angels of foreign lands' who descend to accompany him on his flight. This exegesis pays tribute to the fact that the angels first ascend – a narrative trait that is generally neglected by scholars.

27 See Jacob, Buch 629; von Rad, Buch 256; Fokkelman, Art 198.

28 According to Josh 13:26.30; 21:38; 2Sam 2:8-10; 1Kgs 4:14 Mahanaim belongs to the East-Jordanian territory of the northern Kingdom of Israel.

29 Blum, Komposition 141.

30 Against Houtman, Jacob.

31 See Römer, Genèse 190.



This, however, does not imply that the scene is dispensable for the composition. Especially its allusions to Gen 28 create a setting of a heavenly welcome of the returnee by the messengers of God.<sup>32</sup> In the older tradition of the discovery of the cultic place of Bethel, Jacob discovers the place by chance, while in Gen 32 the meeting is instigated by the heavenly messengers themselves. By their presence alone they assure Jacob of God's presence and his protection before his disconcerting meeting with his betrayed brother Esau. As was the case at Bethel, the message does not require any words.

(2) The findings in *Gen 32:1-16* are slightly more complicated. The whole scene presupposes on the one hand the preceding narrative of the miraculous increase of Jacob's flock in Gen 30:25-43 and expands on it. On the other hand the focus of the narrative changes since God is introduced into it which results in a theological interpretation. This implies that already its earliest version is younger than Gen 30:25-43.<sup>33</sup> Twice Jacob receives the order to return, once in v.3 and once in v.11-13.

In Gen 31:3 YHWH orders his return without any preparation or scenic introduction: "Return (*šwb*) to the land of your father (*ʔrš ʔbwtk*) and to your relatives (*moldtk*)! I will be with you (*ʔhyh ʕmk*)."<sup>34</sup> YHWH's escort guarantees success. This order to return interrupts the flow of the narrative and the transition from v.1-2 to v.4-5 and spoils the climax of the second order to return in v.11-13. At the same time the order corresponds to the youngest layer of the divine promise at Bethel (Gen 28:15) as several catch-words indicate: "Behold I am with you (*ʔnky ʕmk*). I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back (*šwb hif.*) to this land (*hʔdmh hzʔ*) ..." Apparently, Gen 31:3 belongs to an interpretative reworking that, from the beginning, places every action of the patriarch under the authority of divine commands – in this respect it is close to other commanding speeches of YHWH (see above under 2.1).

The other order to return in Gen 31:11-13 is properly staged. Here it is not YHWH who speaks but his messenger and Jacob receives his message during a dream. The answer of Jacob's wives in Gen 31:16b can only refer to this speech: "Now then, do just as God (!) has told you." The speech of the divine messenger in Gen 31:11-13 represents after Gen 28 the decisive hinge of the Jacob tradition. Most likely the

32 The place name Mahanaim is primary against the etiology of the name; therefore an explanation of the dual is not required by the scenic setting.

33 Correctly Blum, *Composition* 121-132, cf. also Kratz, *Composition* 266-267.

speech followed immediately after v.9 and was only later expanded.<sup>34</sup> Its original form was as follows:

- 11 And in the dream the messenger of God said to me: Jacob! Here I am, I answered.
- 12 And he said: ...<sup>35</sup>
- 13 I am the God (who is in) Bethel,<sup>36</sup>  
 where you have anointed a Mazzebe and  
 where you made a vow to me.  
 Now arise and leave this land and  
 return to your native land.

The speech refers back explicitly to the theophany of YHWH in Gen 28:12-13a\*, the setting up and anointing of a Mazzebe (Gen 28:18), the naming of the place (Gen 28:19) and the vow of Jacob (Gen 28:22). On the level of the overall composition of the Jacob tradition, the “messenger of God” in Gen 31:11-13 is no one else than YHWH himself who appeared to the patriarch at Bethel and who is now in the process of helping him to return safely to the house of his father (Gen 28:21a). Already the introduction of the messenger stresses this identification and v.3 as a divine speech fits well to this identification. He is a “messenger” in as much since the God who appeared to Jacob at Bethel is now speaking to him (Gen 31:11-13). On the level of Jacob as a person of a (larger) narrative the divine messenger in v.11 is a messenger of God to whom the patriarch owes – according to v.9 – his wealth and his flock and whom he calls in v.5 “God of my father”. On this narrative level, the “messenger of God” is a member of the numinous staff of the family’s religion and a protective deity.

(3) Gen 32:23-33\* is probably the text of the highest theological profundity for our topic as well as its darkest proponent.<sup>37</sup> It is not a divine

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34 Immediately before the revelation in a dream by God’s messenger we have in v.10 another, conflicting dream; here Jacob sees how his flock increased despite several attempts by Laban to prevent this. Furthermore the dream introduces a different colouring (*brdym* instead of *tlʿym*). Since dreams in Antiquity were generally understood as divine pronouncements, v.10 interprets Jacob’s statements of v.9 that it was God himself and not Jacob using dubious shepherd’s tricks (Gen 30:37-43) who snatched the flock from Laban and gave it to Jacob.

35 A later author identifies the dreams of v.10 and v.12 with each other and adds the miraculous increase of Jacob’s flock to the second dream where such a statement was originally missing. It now interrupts the address and the self-presentation of the divine messenger.

36 In the difficult construction *hʿl bytʿl* it is impossible to regard *bytʿl* as a divine name. Rather it must refer to place as is indicated by the following relative clauses with the particle *šm*. The construction is probably best explained as an abbreviated clause (i.e. “the God, [the one who is in] Bethel”; cf. GesK §127) or, following Brockelmann, Syntax §82, as an adverbial construction. LXX interprets accordingly and reads “the one who has appeared to you in Bethel”; cf. also Tg. Onqelos and Tg. Ps-Jonathan.

messenger but “a man” (ʔyš) who attacks Jacob in the darkness of the night and who wrestles him at Jabbok. As soon as the attacker realizes that he is unable to overwhelm (*ʔykl*) Jacob, he injures him at his hip (Gen 32:26a). Exegetes often tend to solve the problem of the text by identifying the anonymous man with a demon.<sup>38</sup> The continuation of the narrative, however, makes such an identification difficult to sustain, since demons tend not to give a blessing. Who, then, is the mysterious man in Gen 32:23-33?

In the light of Hos 12:5a and the Jewish exegesis of the passage from Targum Neofiti I to Benno Jacob one is tempted to identify the man with an angel. Gen 32, however, moves beyond such an interpretation. The anonymous man gives Jacob a new name, calling him Israel, and justifies the new name with the fight that had just happened: “For you have striven (*śrḥ*) with God (!) and with humans and you have prevailed (*ykl*)” (Gen 32:29).<sup>39</sup> This corresponds to the naming of the place by Jacob: “so Jacob called the place Penuel, (saying), ‘For I have seen God<sup>40</sup> face to face and yet my life is preserved’” (Gen 32:31). The narrator was obviously of the opinion that Jacob had wrestled no other than God himself.<sup>41</sup> Jacob himself realizes that too as the naming of the place in Gen 32:31 indicates. Jacob either realized during the fight itself or later after the unknown man refuses to reveal his name (cf. Judg 13:17-18) that he does not deal with a mortal here but with his God. Therefore he clings to this superhuman opponent: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen 32:27b). So, the trickster becomes the blessed divine warrior Israel. The change of the name indicates his new nature. After this encounter with God that encompassed life and death and during which Jacob prevailed he is able to encounter his cheated

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37 The text is not an individual saga (against Gunkel, Noth and others) but a scene constructed for the current literary context. It is difficult to argue for a pre-Israelite provenance of the text. The kernel of the scene is to be found in Gen 32:23.25b.26a. 27-30.31(?).32; for literary analysis and further bibliography see Köckert, Gegner 167-174.

38 On the problems of such identification see Köckert, Gegner 161-166.

39 Köhler / Baumgartner, Lexicon 380b gives as basic meaning for *ykl* ‘to endure’, ‘to comprehend’, ‘to be able’, ‘to prevail’. Such a translation in Gen 32:29 (and Hos 12:5a) is supported by the absolute use of the verb. Elliger, Jacobskampf 166, stresses that the verb does not express more than the objective fact that Jacob remained ‘on top of things’ as he has done or will do in the other conflicts with fellow humans and that he is even able to do so when God himself brings him close to the verge of disaster.

40 Here it is impossible to translate *ʔlhm* as heavenly beings and place them in opposition to earthly beings; an interpretation that may be possible for v.29.

41 After a careful analysis Spieckermann, Gotteskampf 19, arrives at the same conclusion.

brother Esau and can look him in the eye “like seeing the face of God” (Gen 33:10).<sup>42</sup>

Israel was born in a battle with the divine – no other people has told of its beginnings in such a dramatic way. The divine name, YHWH, is not mentioned in the narrative. Its revelation is refused explicitly in v.30. Superficially this is done because of the dramaturgy of the narrative that requires an incognito of the attacker. A combat between the ancestor of Israel and YHWH, the God of Israel transcends the sayable possibilities.

A bold interpreter in *Hos 12* drew further consequences from this. He takes up and conflates large portions of the Jacob-cycle including the priestly passages and provides his readers with a surprising exegesis.<sup>43</sup> From the etiology of Israel in Gen 32:29b an early Midrash in *Hos 12:4-5a* takes up the combat with God (*śrḥ ʿm ʾlhym*) as well as Jacob’s prevailing (*ykl*) but defuses its *Vorlage* in *Hos 12:5a* by transforming the combat with God into a combat<sup>44</sup> with an angel (*wyśr ʾl mlʾk*).<sup>45</sup> As far as the exegesis is concerned the text remains faithful to its *Vorlage* in as much as the use of the word “angel” takes into account that it was a “man” whom Jacob encountered at Jabbok (Gen 32:25b). The equation of “man” = “angel” is possibly derived from Gen 18-19. Be it as it may, here the angel represents God on earth. Especially the following anthropomorphic statements in v.5 that explain Gen 32:27 were regarded as too outrageous as to relate them to God. “The other had to weep and to implore him” could be said of an angel but certainly not of God.<sup>46</sup> The modern interpretation of the attacker as a demon follows this line of thought.

(4) In the Jacob tradition an angel occurs for the last time in the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh in *Gen 48:15-16*. The *mlʾk* is not specified here. The parallelism with the two proceeding parts indicates, however, that he is a representative of God. Jacob leads his life “before

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42 On the manifold contextual allusions that give the scene its depth of field see Blum, *Komposition* 140-150 and Spieckermann.

43 See here Pfeiffer, *Heiligtum* 68-100.

44 Due to the Masoretic vocalisation the verb is usually derived from the root *śrḥ* ‘to rule’. In light of the following *ykl* and its rendering in LXX and α’ *śrḥ* is more likely (HAL, 1354).

45 The change in preposition over against the *Vorlage* (*ʿm*) and in contrast to *Hos 12:4b* (*ʾl*) can probably be best explained that *Hos 12:5a* aimed at creating an even closer analogy to the name “Israel” by formulating *yśrʾl*.

46 Until today it is detested who serves as the subject to these verbs in *Hos 12:5a* and whether they refer to Gen 32:27a (God in the *Gestalt* of the man) or to Gen 32:27b (Jacob). As far as the context is concerned both possibilities make sense. The view put forward here follows Pfeiffer, *Heiligtum* 86-88.

God"; it is, however, not God but his angel who intervenes in his life: it is he who redeems and protects from harm. The blessing belongs to a late stage of the tradition and was – as its introduction shows – originally intended for Joseph.<sup>47</sup> The older two-partite predication of God in verses 15 and 16a was later expanded by a third one. The formulations of the blessing are unusual for the patriarchal narratives. The first expression "the God in whose ways my fathers walked" takes up Gen 17:1 (P) and Gen 24:40 (post-P) and the third already knows of the metaphoric use of the legal term *gʾl* ("to redeem") for God,<sup>48</sup> but uses it for "the angel who has redeemed me from all harm" (*rʿ*). Unfortunately it remains unclear to what the redeeming refers. Gen 31:7 is closest here: "God, however, would not let him (= Laban) do me any harm (*rʿ* hif.). The *mlʾk* in Gen 48:16 is not a messenger but God's representative who does to Jacob what he ascribes to YHWH in Gen 31:7.

#### 4. Heavenly Beings in the Abraham-Tradition

(1) Of the relevant texts *Gen 18* has the most prominent reception history in Christianity and more specifically in Eastern Christianity. The visitation of the three men in Abraham's tent was understood from a very early date onwards as a depiction of the trinity.<sup>49</sup> Here the representation of the Trinity on the icon painted by Andrej Rubljov in 1410 is especially famous.<sup>50</sup> It was, however, never the intention of the biblical narrator to interpret the visit of the three men in Gen 18 as a Trinitarian event.

This becomes clear if one looks at the distribution of the different terms for the heavenly beings in *Gen 18-19*. Before doing so we have to evaluate the connection of both chapters to a single narrative unit within the framework of a larger overall composition.<sup>51</sup> The oldest liter-

47 See Schöpfung, Jakob 511ff.

48 In the Pentateuch this concept only occurs in Exod 6:6; 15:13 but see the polemics against a redemption by only an angel in Is 63:9.

49 See the classic formulations of Augustine: *et ipse Abraham tres vidit, unum adoravit et nonne unus erat hospes in tribus qui venit ad patrem Abraham*. Cf. also the fresco in S. Maria Maggiore (Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> century CE) and further evidence in LCI I, 532 and plate 3.

50 The icon shows three – apart from their different garments – identical men with wings, halo and staff seated around a table that is decorated with a filled bowl. Today the icon is housed in the Tretjakow gallery in Moscow. The Moscow Synod of 1551 gave the icon quasi canonical status by decreeing that it should serve as model for any representation of the Trinity in Russian icon painting.

51 On the overall composition of the Abraham-Lot-narrative (Gunkel) see Blum, *Komposition* 273-289, and for Gen 18:1-16 see Köckert, *Vätergott* 235-238. More compli-

ary stratum can be found in a diptych: both parts of it complement each other but are nevertheless shaped in contrast to each other and are connected by the course of the day.<sup>52</sup> During the first part of the narrative the heavenly beings visit Abraham unrecognized at noon. He pays honour to them in front of his tent without knowing to whom he plays the host. As way of saying thank you the hosts announce the birth of a son (Gen 18:1b-16<sup>53</sup>). The second part is set in Sodom at night. Lot also offers hospitality by inviting the foreign men into his house. Here they say thank you by saving him and his family from the city-mob and the descending divine judgement of Sodom (Gen 19:1-27a.<sup>54</sup>). The first part refers to the birth of Isaac. The root *šḥq* in Gen 18:12-15 as well as the note on his birth in Gen 21:1-6 that has now replaced the older closure of the overall composition alludes to this frequently. The second part, in contrast, ends in the darkness of a cave (Gen 19:30-38). Isaac is a present of the heavenly beings while Moab and Ammon are the product of an incestuous encounter. Right from the beginning, the larger narrative context has a global perspective. The focus is the origin of Israel and her Eastern neighbours. Here Gen 18:16b.20-22a.33b form the necessary narrative bridge that links both parts.<sup>55</sup> The verses prepare for the Sodom part of the narrative that could not exist without the Mamre part and this bridge.<sup>56</sup> Gen 19 has incorporated different material but it is impossible to separate any single scene.<sup>57</sup>

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cated solutions of the literary problems are offered by Levin, Jahwist 153-170, and Kratz, Composition 270-272, who argues for an independent Lot tradition in Gen 19 as the focal point.

- 52 Gen 18:1b (Noon); 19:1a (evening); 19:5 (night); 19:15 (dawn); 10:23 (sunrise); 19:27 (early in the morning); 13:33 (during this night); 19:34 (on the following day); 19:35 (during this night).
- 53 Gen 18:1b cannot have been the original continuation of Gen 18:1a because it would then be YHWH who sits in front of his tent. Gen 18:1a became necessary after Gen 18 was separated as a continuation from its original reference text (Gen 13:1-18\*). Gen 13:18 mentions Abraham who sits in the place that Gen 18:1a refers to.
- 54 Gen 19:27b presupposes the later addition of the legal dispute between Abraham and YHWH about God's justice in Gen 18:22b-33a; this passage in turn cannot be separated from YHWH's reflection in Gen 18:17-19. Gen 19:29 belongs to P.
- 55 Thus already Wellhausen, Composition 25-26, in his analysis.
- 56 Blum, Komposition 280, has shown conclusively that already the exposition of the narrative in Gen 19:1-3 is dependent on the narrative set in Mamre.
- 57 This is definitively true for the events in Sodom (Gen 19:4-11) that are formulated with knowledge of the material used in Judg 19 (in a similar vein Gen 18:1-15 presupposes the narrative structure of 2Kgs 4). The scene realizes Gen 18:21, since YHWH has not yet given a final judgement on Sodom here (in contrast to Gen 18:17.23-33). Thus Gen 19:4-11 demonstrates whether Sodom "has done altogether according to the outcry" (cf. Gen 18:21a with Gen 19:4b.13). Also the Zohar episode cannot be expunged since Gen 19:30-38 depends on it. The arguments for a separa-

The change between YHWH and the three men, between the three men and the two messengers as well as the transition from plural to singular verbs connected to it has provoked manifold confusion. The whole exegetical tool-box has been used on it.<sup>58</sup> With regard to the main structure of the larger narrative context in Gen 18-19 the solution proposed by Erhard Blum seems to do the most justice to the oscillating text.<sup>59</sup> The introduction of the three men instead of YHWH allows the narrator to keep YHWH at first incognito. This is part of the peculiarity of narratives describing heavenly visitors on earth.<sup>60</sup> In Gen 18 YHWH is both: a member of the three (v.3) and he appears as the three men (v.1.9.10); during the announcement of the birth of Isaac, however (v.10-15), the text only mentions him. Nevertheless, to maintain YHWH's incognito as a single man would have been enough (as is the case, for example, in Gen 32:23ff.). Most likely, the mentioning of three men seems to have been a reminiscence to a pre-Israelite local tradition rooted in Hebron. The basis for such an interpretative model is, however, relatively small.<sup>61</sup> The circumstances in Ugarit are little clearer: in the mythological texts messengers often appear in pairs (see below under 5.). If this concept also forms the background of Gen 18 the three men, then, must have always been shaped as YHWH with two of his messengers whose messenger activity was never activated. Both explanations do not have to exclude each other: an early stage of Gen 18 is rooted in the local tradition of a triad at Hebron while the expanded version of the larger narrative interprets this concept as YHWH and his two messengers.

After the visit to Abraham all three men move on to Sodom in the older version of the larger narrative. As was the case in Gen 18:3.10-15, also in Gen 19 YHWH emerges occasionally as one of the three men.<sup>62</sup>

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tion can only be explained with the nature of the narrative material but not be used as a literary-critical criteria.

58 On the history of scholarship see Letellier, Day, 1-29. The most recent confusion can be viewed and read in Fabry, Warum. Fabry discovers a basic layer (*Grundschrift*) with the theme of "theoxeny" that does not even have a point.

59 Blum, *Komposition* 277-282.

60 See Judg 6:11-24; 13:2-24 and the parallels from Greek antiquity in Gunkel's commentary.

61 Possibly, this can be concluded from Num 13:22; Josh 15:14; Judg 1:10, i.e. texts that report the names of three children of Anak associated with Hebron. These children were probably worshipped there as heroes (in Num 13:33 the Anakites appear as *Nephilim*; in Deut 2:10-11; 2:20-21 they are called *Rephaim*). Divine triads are known from elsewhere in Syro-Palestine (see the evidence in Müller, Gott 128-132, that needs, however, to be assessed critically).

62 Cf. Gen 19:3bα.14.16. Also the speaker in Gen 19:17 (MT) is a single individual (LXX, Peshitta and Vulgate read the plural here) whom Lot answers in such a way in v.18

He is the subject of the decisive moments of the narrative. It is he who announces the birth of the son Isaac (Gen 18:10-15) and he is responsible for the destruction of Sodom (Gen 19:23-25).

The differentiation between YHWH and the “men” allows – apart from the obvious incognito – to realize something like a divine ubiquity on a narrative level and – with the participation of divine beings – to construct a synchronic sequence of events, even though one was only able to narrate these things one after the other. All this happens in the version expanded by Gen 18:17-19.22b-33a. Originally all three men moved to Sodom; now Abraham engages YHWH in a discussion about the justice of the judge of the earth in the light of the destruction of an entire city. The reader, therefore, has to relate the “men” who “turned from there, and went towards Sodom” (Gen 18:22a) silently to the other two men, since YHWH remains standing before Abraham.<sup>63</sup> The expanded version accounted for this in Gen 19, too, and explained the relationship between YHWH and the other two men in such a way that the text adds “the two messengers” in Gen 19:1(.25) and states more precisely to whom the plural forms – that originally referred to all three men – relate. Furthermore Gen 19:13b explicitly adds that they were sent by YHWH. Since Gen 19:1 now defines the men who went to Sodom as messengers the readers must relate “the men” in Gen 19:10.12.16 and the corresponding plurals in Gen 19:17 (“When they had brought them outside”) and Gen 19:18 (“And Lot said to them”) to these messengers. Consequently, the Samaritan Pentateuch in Gen 19:12 and the Septuagint in Gen 19:16 identify these men explicitly as “messengers”. This identification for the passages seemed logical for both v.12-13 and v.16 since YHWH is mentioned explicitly next to the men. By dividing the three men into YHWH and two messengers the narrator is able to create a simultaneous sequence of events: two messengers visit Lot and at the same time Abraham argues with YHWH about the fate of the just men during the judgement of Sodom.

However, where is YHWH *after* the discussion with Abraham? Gen 18:33a simply states: “And YHWH went his way ...” Where exactly he went is not said. His destination only becomes clear during the destruction of Sodom in Gen 19:24. Here the biblical text is confusing and redundant: “And YHWH rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulphur and fire from YHWH out of Heaven”. The last four words seem clumsy and

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that the Masoretes were able to relate *ʾādōnāy* to YHWH (cf. Gen 18:3!). According to MT he must then be also the speaker of v.21-22.

63 In Gen 18:22b scribes reversed subject and object (see *app. crit.* of BHS), because they understood ‘standing before’ as ‘standing in service before ...’ and this was impossible to do for YHWH.



do not yield any new information.<sup>64</sup> This is, however, not the case if one understands “from heaven” as an intended detailed localization of YHWH.<sup>65</sup> Then, the not very elegantly added remark discloses where YHWH has to be located after his departure in Gen 18:33a: he is not with Lot’s family on their way to Zohar but in heaven. In the expanded version of the narrative a personal encounter with YHWH, the God of Israel, is reserved exclusively for Abraham. According to this perspective, the single person who speaks in Gen 19:17-22 with Lot is no longer YHWH but one of the two men who – as his messengers – accompany Lot and his two daughters on their flight from the doomed city. YHWH enters the stage again at dawn but he is now in heaven (v.23-25) and rains sulphur and fire on the cities of proverbial godlessness.

The “three men” who visit Abraham belong to the religious heritage of Hebron from the dim and distant past. The Judean narrator of monarchic times uses this heritage to describe how Abraham the patriarch experienced YHWH’s reality on earth. This experience, like any other true divine experience, is the experience of a mystery. There are few biblical narratives that stress this fact so clearly as this one that conceals God’s presence in three men simultaneously. The extended version from Persian times explicitly locates YHWH in heaven but does not confine him to it. On earth, however, we encounter him as “man” in an earthly and therefore puzzling appearance. The use of the concept of divine messengers explains the relationship between YHWH and “the men”. In contrast to the first version of the narrative, YHWH only appears to Abraham. Lot as a non-Israelite only meets his messengers.

(2) *Gen 16* also narrates an encounter of a messenger of YHWH with a foreigner, who is described in Gen 16:1b as a female Egyptian slave whose place of origin could have been deduced from Gen 12:6.<sup>66</sup> In the course of the narrative we encounter in few verses, the messenger of YHWH, YHWH himself and God next to each other. This juxtaposition can be explained best by taking the different levels of communication into account.

While Hagar is a fugitive from her mistress Sarah she is found by the “messenger of YHWH” near a Wadi in the wilderness where he

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64 Keel, Sodom explains the origin of the material by attributing the destruction of Sodom to a Sun-God; this interpretation is highly likely since the judgement commences at dawn. The last four words are then used to make sure that it is YHWH who fulfils the attributes of the Sun-God. This may be the case for the pre-history of the material but it does not explain why the localization “from heaven” is used.

65 In other texts of the Hebrew Bible where God lets sulphur and fire either come over humans (Ezek 38:22) or rains it (Ps 11:6) the localization “from heaven” is missing.

66 The narrative is hardly a single unity. Against the common opinion (Gunkel, Westermann) only Gen 16:3.16 can be attributed to P.

speaks to her (v.7-8). From the following verses (v.9-11) that all start with the same introductory formula only v.11 relates to Hagar's situation. V.9 disapproves of her flight, even though it seemed acceptable to v.11, and prepares for v.15 that anticipates her return. Both verses were added here after Gen 21:8ff. was inserted into the Abraham narrative and one had to take this in Gen 16 into account.<sup>67</sup> Gen 16:10 is probably even younger since this promise moves far beyond the situation of Hagar and renders the following announcement of a son superfluous.<sup>68</sup> Originally the narrative continued after v.8 in v.11. After the messenger learned of Hagar's whence and where he announces to the pregnant woman the birth of a son whom she shall call "Ishmael". The interpretation of the name that follows refers to Hagar's situation and takes the first part of the name into account but does not fit with the name's theophoric element *ʔ*. The secondary addition of this interpretation becomes apparent if one scrutinizes the difficult connection of v.12: here the pronoun *hwʔ* refers back to the name but it cannot be connected with its explanation. The reference to the future fate of the child in the form of a birth oracle (cf. Gen 25:23) or a tribal proverb did not know the interpretation of the name with a reference to YHWH who had heard of Hagar's misery (cf. Exod 3:7).

Therefore Hagar's reaction to the speech of the messenger in v.13-14 is very surprising.<sup>69</sup> The reader knows since Gen 16:7 that it was the messenger of YHWH who found the fugitive in the wilderness but Hagar does not have this knowledge. She simply saw a man who inquired after her fate. Towards the end of the episode she identifies the man, who "spoke to her", with God (*ʔ*) because of his wonderful announcement: "You are a God of seeing ..." <sup>70</sup> The narrator, however, knows that it was simply the messenger of YHWH. Therefore he intro-

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67 Gen 16:15 opposes the order of Gen 16:11 where Hagar and not Abraham shall name the child. V.15 most likely pushed aside the original note of the birth in a move to reconcile with Gen 21.

68 Furthermore Gen 16:10 combines the late promises of Gen 22:17 and Gen 32:12 and is therefore formulated as a divine speech – something that is not motivated by the context of Gen 16.

69 Both verses contain numerous problems which we cannot solve here (see the recent proposals by Knauf, *Ismael* 45-49; Koenen, *Textgeschichte* 468-474, and Iršigler, *Erhörungsmotiv* 121-124). It has been proposed from time to time to separate the verses from the original narrative (von Seters, *Abraham* 193; Knauf, *Ismael* 26f.) but the narrative needs an identifying reaction of Hagar. Then the well can only be named after v.13. The tension between the name Ishmael ("God has heard") and the reaction of Hagar that stresses God's seeing and the name of the well cannot be pursued here.

70 The easiest way to explain the phrase is to follow LXX that translates "God who sees me". On the phrase *ʔrʔy* see Köckert, *Vätergott* 76-77.

duces Hagar's thankful profession in Gen 16:13a as a praise of the name of YHWH. At least the narrator did not understand the singular stroke of fate as an independent divinity but sees in it a title of YHWH.

Gen 16 distinguishes between YHWH and the messenger in such a way that YHWH is aware of Hagar but only takes care of her via his messenger who speaks to her. The messenger replaces God in the human realm. Since God is present in the message of the messenger, Hagar is able to interpret her encounter as an encounter with God.

(3) The second narrative about Hagar (Gen 21:8-21) presupposes in its current *Gestalt* the first Hagar episode of Gen 16.<sup>71</sup> The text belongs to a new and expanded edition of the Abraham tradition from Persian times.<sup>72</sup> The relationship between God and his messenger has not changed but the distance between God's messenger and humans has grown significantly.

Gen 21:8-21 is even less a family narrative or episode than Gen 16. Gen 21:10 uses two verbs to describe the conflict and its solution that are of pivotal significance for Israel's relationship to the land: "to drive out" (*grš*) and "to inherit" (*yrš*). On the level of national history the inheritance is the land. In Gen 21:12 the narrator puts the answer who is going to be the legitimate heir of this inheritance and what shall happen to the others into God's mouth. If the land is regarded as a certain quality of salvation there is little room for compromises in questions regarding its possession. If only one can inherit, the others have to leave the inheritance. Gen 21, however, notes explicitly that God is not only with the heirs but also with the exiles as the narrator stresses in v.20 in regard to the boy (Ishmael). Even more, the promise to Abraham to become a great nation (Gen 12:2) does not only refer to Isaac but also to "the son of the slave-woman" (Gen 21:13).

In the second part of the narrative Gen 21 uses – just like Gen 16 – the verbs "to see" and "to hear" but shifts their accentuation. God in heaven hears the cry of the exiled boy (Gen 21:17). He opens Hagar's eyes so that she will find water (Gen 21:19). But he only speaks to Abraham directly (Gen 21:12-13). With the exiled Hagar he simply communicates via his messenger. In contrast to Gen 16 God's messenger does not go and look for Hagar; like God himself he is in heaven and has to call upon her from there. Therefore his speech is a heavenly speech and recognized as such from the beginning. On the one hand the messenger tells Hagar that God has heard the cry of the boy (Gen 21:17b). Here he is distinguished from God. On the other hand he an-

71 Cf. Blum, Composition 311-320.

72 Thus with different arguments Levin, Jahwist 177; Kratz, Composition 260; Köckert, Geschichte 119.125.

nounces to her in the form of a divine speech what God's plans for the boy are (Gen 21:18): "I will make a great nation of him". The change in person takes up the direct address to Abraham in Gen 21:13 and can therefore literary-critically not be queried. Here, the messenger of God appears as God himself. God communicates with humans, be it directly or indirectly via his messengers, only from heaven. His messenger is transformed in a pure heavenly being that no longer replaces God on earth. Thus the differentiation between God and his messenger has lost its original intention but (still) enables a differentiation between different levels of communication: God talks to Abraham but his messenger with Hagar.

(4) Also in *Gen 22* a messenger acts from heaven (cf. Gen 22:11 with Gen 21:17) but does not appear incarnate on earth. He has become – as in Gen 21:17-18 – a pure heavenly being, i.e. an "angel".<sup>73</sup> In both passages the angel speaks in the first person (cf. Gen 22:11b with Gen 21:18) but in Gen 22 the change from "God" (v.1-3.8.9) to "messenger of God" (v.11-12.15-18) and finally to YHWH (v.14) creates further complication and confusion. The multiple change in persons cannot be explained by several literary hands. The second speech of the messenger (v.15-18) has long been recognized as a secondary addition<sup>74</sup> but even without this addition, the "messenger of YHWH" remains a firm part of the substance of the narrative. Even if we attribute v.14b to a later editor – as is done frequently but unjustified<sup>75</sup> – YHWH remains indispensable for the naming of the place by Abraham.

The change from "Elohim" right at the beginning of the narrative to "messengers of YHWH" at its turning point has caused offence. Here it is remarkable that the term "Elohim" is used with the definitive arti-

73 Thus correctly Westermann, *Genesis* 442. This insight is unfortunately eliminated in Rötger's extensive treatment of the subject in Gen 21-22, since he eliminates without providing any reasons the important localization "from heaven" (Mal'ak Jahwe 48-71).

74 See already Wellhausen, *Composition* 26. The recent defence of the originality of Gen 22:15-18 on the basis of intertextual observations by Steins, *Bindung* 135-147, only demonstrates how biblical exegesis in some quarters has gone to the dogs. Similar things can be said about the random, agenda-driven reconstruction of a base text by Hardmeier, *Realitätssinn* 1-75, who neglects to provide any reason for his atomizing and surgical literary-criticism in Gen 22:1-2 and Gen 22:12.

75 See only the hints at this special place that run through the narrative (v.2.3.4.9.14) and to which the sacrifice is obviously tied. YHWH himself has chosen this place (v.2.3.9). The closing sentence in v.14b with which the narrator arrives in the present ("today") is the climax and aim of these allusions. "The Mountain (on which) YHWH appears" is not a real place name but a sparsely cloaked allusion to Jerusalem. See the notes in Blum, *Komposition* 324, and Veijola, *Opfer* 152-153.

cle.<sup>76</sup> If we take the multifaceted connections between Gen 21:8-20 and Gen 22 into account<sup>77</sup> it is likely to interpret the article as an explicit reference to God who determined Isaac as the heir of Abraham (Gen 21:21) and who is also “with Ishmael” (Gen 21:20).<sup>78</sup> This, at first glance, intensifies the demand of this God in Gen 22:2. At a second glance, however, this reference can be interpreted as a hint of the author for his readers to cling to the promise of this God in Gen 21:12 – in spite of an unreasonable demand. Despite the fact that Abraham does not possess this lens he acts accordingly, if we take his speeches to his servants (Gen 22:5) and to his son (Gen 22:8) literally. As Gen 22:14 shows, for the narrator it is abundantly clear that this God has to be identified with no other than YHWH.

Is there a plausible reason for the change to YHWH and his messenger? The divine name YHWH is only mentioned when the messenger interferes in Gen 22:11. During the plan to bring the son as sacrifice the general term “God” is used. Therefore we can suspect that the author wanted to stress Abraham’s experience of the Divinity by employing this remarkable difference:

Solange sich Jhwh rätselhaft hinter seinem drohenden Befehl in V.2 verbirgt, steht die Gottesbezeichnung (*h*)<sup>79</sup>*lhym*, seine befreiende Zuwendung zu Abraham hingegen zeigt die Verwendung des Eigennamens an.<sup>79</sup>

While the change from God to his messenger in Gen 21 is connected to the addressee, the change from “God” to YHWH and his messenger in Gen 22 differentiates between the different forms by which God meets Abraham. Despite the fact that the “messenger of YHWH” called Abraham from heaven, Abraham encounters in this call YHWH himself. Did not Abraham tell his son on the way to the slaughtering place: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering”?<sup>80</sup> In the end he calls this place “YHWH will provide”.

(5) An angel appears for the last time in Gen 24 in the Abraham narrative. Abraham exhorts his servant with the following words: “YHWH, the God of heaven, ... he will send his messenger before you” (Gen 24:7). After he arrives at the relatives in Aram-Naharaim the servant remembers Abraham’s words: “YHWH before whom I walk will

76 In v.3 and v.9 the article is obviously used to create a reference back to God mentioned at the start of the narrative.

77 Blum, *Komposition* 314, calls the expulsion of Ishmael the dress-rehearsal of Gen 22.

78 Already *Midr. Gen. Rab.* realizes the connection between Gen 22:2 and Gen 21:1 but interprets it as an inconsistency in God that Abraham accepts willingly (LVI 10).

79 Blum, *Komposition* 323.

80 Here in Gen 22:8 the article is missing for *lhym*; maybe an indication that Abraham as the protagonist of the narrative had hoped to the end that God would intervene.

send his messenger with you and make your journey successful" (Gen 24:40). Abraham's experiences with YHWH from which he derives his trust in God's support appear in the summarizing relative clauses. These clauses reveal the literary horizon of Gen 24. This horizon encompasses the Abraham narrative as a whole in its late and post-priestly form: Gen 24:7 alludes to Gen 12:1-3 as well as to the divine speeches (*Verheißungsreden*) in general and to the sworn promise of the land for Abraham in Gen 15:18. Gen 24:40 is clearly familiar with Gen 17:1.

The concept of a messenger who travels "before you" does not originate in the patriarchal narratives but is derived from the late deuteronomistic passages of the Exodus-narrative. The "guiding angel" is closely connected with the deliverance from Egypt and the wandering through the desert into the promised land (Exod 14:19; 23:20-23; Num 20:16). On the other hand the sending of a messenger appears instead of a direct guidance by God as an emergency measurement that assures a divine escort after Israel's sin in Exod 32 and protects Israel from God's anger (Exod 32:34; 33:2; cf. God's face in Exod 33:14).

Gen 24:7.40 does not only presuppose the literary connection of patriarchal and Exodus narrative but also transfers the concept of a guiding angel to the realm of family religion. Alexander Rofé has shown conclusively that the fairly extensive narrative is the product of a rather late author.<sup>81</sup>

The *ml'k* of Gen 24 is as invisible as he has been in Gen 48:16 and he does not deliver an explicit message. He is simply a way in which God is close to humans in a concealed way. Therefore the translation with "angel" is most appropriate for both passages. God is with the humans as a guardian angel (see Ps 91:11), who paves the way (Gen 24:7) and makes life successful (*šlh* in Gen 24:40). YHWH dwells in heaven and is long called "God of heaven"<sup>82</sup> but his "angel" is invisible and thus "with" and "amongst" the humans.

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81 See Rofé, Enquiry 27-39.

82 The occurrences of the formula all belong to Persian times (Jonah 1:9; 2Chr 36:26; Ezra 1:2; Neh 1:4.5; 2:4.20 etc.) or are even later than that (Dan 2:18.19.37.44; Jdt 5:8; 6:19; 11:17; Tob 7:13; 8:15; 10:11), see also Rofé, Enquiry 28.

## 5. Heavenly Messengers and their Ancient Near Eastern Background

On the basis of a religious-historical model of development it was argued that Israel, during her transition from poly- to monotheism transformed original Canaanite deities into “angels” and “divine messengers”.<sup>83</sup> There are, however, no indications for such a decrease in power of the deities. This interpretative model assumes that those texts that mention divine messengers always derive from ancient and pre-Israelite local sagas dealing with pre-yahwistic deities. Nowadays such a view is difficult to maintain. Only in Gen 18 we can argue for a pre-Israelite setting of the three men but they are introduced as “men” and *not* as messengers.

The so called “theory of interpolation” first developed by M. Lagrange seems to be more promising:<sup>84</sup>

Wo die ältere Zeit unbedenklich Jahwe selber auftreten und handeln liess, ersetzt man ihn später gern durch Engel, entsprechend der zunehmenden Neigung, Jahwe von unmittelbarer Berührung mit dieser Welt fernzuhalten, namentlich ihn von gewissen belastenden Handlungen zu befreien.<sup>85</sup>

This explanation is supported by those texts where YHWH only exists in heaven. Against such an interpretation we have to mention the texts where the messenger and his master speak to humans (Gen 18-19; Gen 21).<sup>86</sup> Furthermore we have to take into account that those texts where YHWH speaks freely and directly with humans are not necessarily part of the oldest parts of the history of tradition but rather belong to the youngest literary level (see above 2.1-3).

A cursory glance at the evidence from the Ancient Near East can help to dissolve this dilemma. Lowell K. Handy has shown convincingly – using Ugarit as an example – that messenger gods have always been an integral part of the Syro-Palestinian pantheon and its hierarchy structured in four categories. The lowest level is occupied by the “messenger gods”. They are gods but they do not take part in the decisions made by higher gods and simply serve as organs executing their orders.<sup>87</sup> In mythical texts from Ugarit we encounter messengers sent by

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83 On this theory see Irvin, *Mytharion* 101f.

84 Lagrange, *Ange* 221.

85 Baumgartner, *Problem* 245. The question remains, however, what exactly burdens YHWH in Gen 16; 21?

86 G. v. Rad's interpretation (*ThWNT* I, 76) that YHWH is always mentioned when the text concerns him and not the human being, while the messenger of YHWH is mentioned when the human being is important is not always possible.

87 Handy, *Host* 149-168.

Yammu to the assembly of gods and to El, the father of the gods.<sup>88</sup> From time to time Baal also sends out messengers.<sup>89</sup> These messengers appear as “young men” delivering messages to Anat but also to Mot. They always act in pairs and even have names. Even mother Asherah employs her own messenger gods.<sup>90</sup> At least in Ugarit these messenger gods only function in the heavenly sphere. With the king (Danil and Kirta), however, El and Baal correspond in person.

Similar things can be said about Mesopotamia, where deities contact each other employing messenger gods. Several main gods even have their own personal messengers whose names we know, while the messenger pair Nusku and Kakka serves several masters.<sup>91</sup> Here, the myth of Nergal and Ershikagal is most instructive: the sky-god Anu sends via Kakka a message to the mistress of the underworld telling her that she should send her envoy Namtar so that he can collect her portion of the sacrificial meal. There is, too, “a long staircase of heaven” (cf. Gen 28:12) that connects heaven and underworld but only the messengers and not the other gods can use it.<sup>92</sup>

While divine messengers are sent in the Bible to announce the birth of a son (Gen 16; Judg 13; Luke 1) in the Ancient Near East, such a message can be delivered by El himself or – in a Hittite text – by the sun-god. The Hittite fairy tale “Appu and his two sons” connects little more with Gen 18 than the motif of a childless couple whom a deity helps to sons.<sup>93</sup> The reason for the childlessness in the Appu text is, however, the inexperience in sexual matters of Appu and his wife. In his helplessness Appu turns to the sun-god, who transforms himself into a young man (!), visits Appu unrecognized and gives him the advice to get properly drunk and to sleep with his wife. The advice is crowned immediately with success. We see that in the Ancient Near East too, a deity has to take up human form to be able to act on earth (cf. the “man” of Gen 32:23-30 and the “men” in Gen 18-19).

For various reasons, the biblical texts under scrutiny avoid a direct communication between God and humans. In Gen 18-19 and Gen 32 the narrative strategy of the texts makes such a communication impossible. In Gen 16, Gen 19 and Gen 21 the differentiation between God

88 KTU 1.2 I 11 (= CoS I 245 = TUAT III 1119).

89 KTU 1.3 III 8,13,32,36; IV 5,32. In KTU 1.3 III 36 the names of the messenger gods are mentioned: they are called *gpn* and *ugr*.

90 They are called *qdš* and *amrr* (KTU 1.3 VI 10-11) and are mentioned next to main deities (1.123, 26).

91 See Meier, Messenger 119-122.

92 The passages are found in Col. I of the Sultantepe version (English translation in Foster, Muses 512-514; German translation in TUAT III/4, 769-771).

93 CoS I, 153-155 = TUAT III/4, 848-851.



and messenger on a narrative level corresponds to the distinction between Israel and foreigners. In Gen 22, in contrast, different experiences of God are allotted to God and the messenger of YHWH. As the brief survey of the Ancient Near Eastern material has shown, we do not need to use any of the questionable theories to explain the idea of mysterious men and divine messengers in the Bible. Ancient Israel was part of the culture of the Ancient Orient and therefore the concept of messenger gods was probably not unknown to her. This concept, however, is nothing more than a transposition of the earthly hierarchy with its institution of a messenger to the heavenly sphere. We cannot dispute that the popularity of "angels" increases when the experience of a transcendent God grows. Already in Gen 28 and Gen 32:2-3 the heavenly messengers represent the transcendence of the heavenly sphere on earth. This tendency of a growing transcendence finally culminates in the concept that the "messengers of YHWH / God" also act simply from heaven (Gen 22:11-12.15-18; 21:17-18). Here we have to remind ourselves that the Ancient Near Eastern concept of a "divine messenger" precedes this process.

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### Abbreviations:

AHw cf. Soden, W. von

CoS cf. Hallo, W.W.

DNWSI cf. Hoftijzer, J.

KAI cf. Donner, H.

KTU cf. Dietrich, M.

LCI cf. Kirschbaum, E.

TUAT cf. Kaiser, O.

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